

Media and the Manchester attacks: evil and emotion

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2017/05/24/media-and-the-manchester-attacks-the-good-bad-and-propaganda/

2017-5-24

The Manchester Arena attacks were extraordinary in their brutality. In response the news media sought to capture an emotional range including anger, pity, fear, pride, and compassion.

But how responsible have journalists been and is the full story going to be told?

The Sun's front-page on the morning after exemplified this duality of the splenetic and the cathartic. I am sure its portrayal of two moral extremes gave voice to many people's feelings. That is one of the functions of mainstream news media in the wake of a profoundly disturbing event like this.



Many of the other [newspaper front pages](#) that day echoed this contrast between evil and innocence. But that kind of dichotomy has problems. Firstly, putting the killer's image on the front page is arguably what Islamic State want. It confirms their power and his martyr-status. And, of course, we do feel killing children is worse than adults, but we

should be cautious about assigning a scale of value to life.

The Manchester Arena attack was unusual in that we knew the identity of the murderer quite soon, partly thanks to leaky American intelligence sources. So the usual debate about not leaping to conclusions about who was to blame did not last long. It was clear from early on that a British-born Muslim with Islamist connections was responsible. Although it will take time to discover just what his support network was and the responsibility of the security services in identifying the threat.

So with the key facts being confirmed so soon, the outstanding aspect of the Manchester Arena coverage was the emotional response. We are used to the familiar routine of politicians making statements about resilience and 'carrying on' but in this case it was the public who seemed to determined to show solidarity and empathy. The mainstream broadcasters and newspapers went with this emotional tide.

Manchester Evening News

#WeStandTogether

WEDNESDAY, 24 MAY, 2017

SOME OF THE MISSING LOVED ONES...



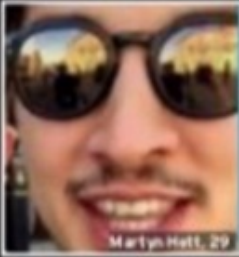
Nae Jones, 14



Wendy Fawell, 50



Allison Howe, 44, and friend Lisa, 43



Martyn Hett, 29



Martin and Angelika Wils



Olisse Rutherford, 17 and Liam Curry, 19



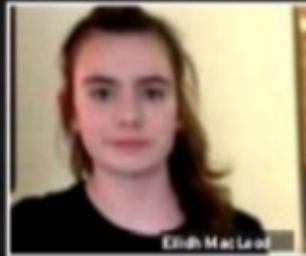
Olivia Campbell, 15



Courtney Boyle



Philip Tson



Eilish MacLeod



Saffie Roussea, eight



Georgia Callender, 18



John Atkinson, 28

AND THOSE NAMED DEAD

Prayers for the missing - and the dead

NAMED - THE BOMBER WHO LIVED AMONG HIS VICTIMS 20 PAGES INSIDE

I was particularly struck by BBC Radio 5's Anna Foster presenting from the vigil. Her interviews with the public were moving testimony, but her language was self-consciously that of a therapist as well as a journalist.

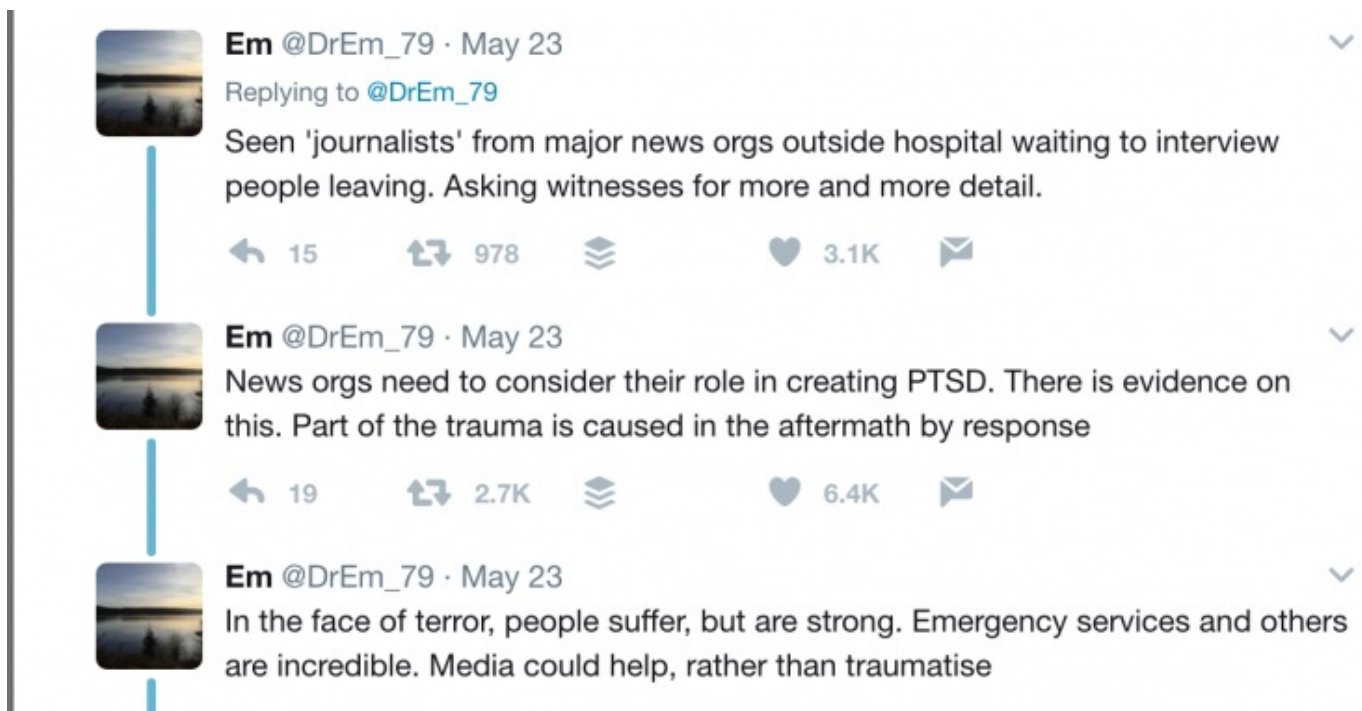
When I wrote [a report for the Tow Center at Columbia University last summer based on interviews with journalists in the UK and USA who cover terror events](#) many told me that they were looking for more 'positive' narratives around these shocking events. The coverage of the Manchester attack went much further than before in humanising the victims, stressing community cohesion, and allowing the public to share their feelings. There was also a strong focus on messages of solidarity from other countries but also other parts of the UK and within different communities in Manchester. Much of this was carried by social networks but news media networked itself into this much more humane response. ITV's story of the homeless man who helped victims was typical of this more affirmative narrative:

This process of vigils and solidarity hashtags feels like a ritual but rituals are very useful. News media should show us brutal reality but it can also be a kind of collective therapy.

That's not to say that there has not been divisive and disturbing coverage. Most of the nastiest has been on social media but it is disturbing that a broadcaster like LBC and a newspaper like the Daily Mail can employ someone who used the phrase 'final solution' in a tweet when children have been slaughtered. To a degree it is important that fear and even loathing is reflected in coverage. If people's anger is not given an airing then there is a danger of allowing resentment to build.

Questions of accuracy and breaking news did not arise to such a great degree because while this was a ghastly incident, it was relatively straightforward as a terror event. There was plenty of 'fake', hoax and malicious content spread of social media but generally journalists (and perhaps the public) are getting better at spotting it.

Journalists gathering material online are getting better at showing care to the people they approach. But there were still complaints of intrusive behaviour.



As [this Press gazette article explains in detail](#) there are codes of conduct and journalists should observe them, but asking relatives or victims to comment is not in itself intrusion if done tactfully and sensitively. Indeed, many find the experience of talking to the media cathartic and the testimony can be an important part of the evidence and emotion that makes up the media narrative.

These are just some early thought based on my own experience of the coverage – please let me know if you have your own views or examples of good and bad journalism.

This article by Polis Director Charlie Beckett @CharlieBeckett

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